



Washington State Senate

The Benton Bulletin

17TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT UPDATE FROM SENATOR DON BENTON

February 7, 2003

2003 SESSION UPDATE

The Legislature convened on Monday, January 13, 2003, for its regular 105-day session scheduled to end on April 27. It is my pleasure to share with you some of the issues that have already surfaced in Olympia.

The current budget crisis, which began with the nationwide recession after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, is a result of increasing costs and declining revenues, compounded by poor fiscal management and smoke and mirrors in the last yearly budget. Washington's recovery is expected to take 18 months longer than the rest of the nation. This is primarily due to the impact of the attacks on the aerospace industry and the burst of the "dot-com" bubble. It's been said that there is no good way out of a bad situation, and significant cuts in state spending will have to be made.

Senate approves GOP supplemental budget saving taxpayers \$127 million. Putting the governor's proposed savings for the next two-year budget on a fast track, the Senate recently approved a supplemental budget (SB 5403) for the rest of the current fiscal year that starts the savings now. A key reason for making cuts now is that it will produce an even greater savings in the next biennium - about \$250 million. Cost-saving budget initiatives include stepping up efforts to ensure those receiving state-subsidized health care insurance are indeed eligible. A recent state audit found that 37,000 enrollees had not provided sufficient information to determine eligibility. The hiring freeze by executive order for cabinet level agencies is extended to all state agencies. A 20 percent reduction in state spending on travel, personal services contracts and equipment is required. Funding is maintained for state Library services for citizens and local libraries, including the Talking Books and Braille programs, but services to the Legislature and state agencies are reduced or eliminated. The measure is now before the House of Representatives.

Libraries, children and pornography don't belong together and SB 5131 will allow law enforcement officers to obtain a search warrant to search library computers if patrons are suspected of viewing child pornography. Technology is available to protect children from viewing pornography at libraries. This measure requires computer terminals located in or near the children's section of libraries to have Internet filters installed.

Senior and disabled property tax exemptions. I have sponsored SB 5184, which would decrease the disposable income of seniors and disabled by the cost of health insurance and Medicare expenditures in the calculation of property tax deferrals. Seniors and disabled currently receive a property tax deferral if disposable household income is \$34,000 or less.



Senator
Don Benton

Committee assignments:

- Financial Services, Insurance and Housing, Chairman
- Highways & Transportation Vice Chairman
- Rules
- Economic Development

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Opening up HOV lanes. SB 5120 opens up traffic to all vehicles, regardless of the number of occupants during nonpeak hours, from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday excluding state holidays. I have also introduced a bill that would allow individuals to purchase a decal that entitles them to drive on HOV lanes, regardless of the number of occupants. What I like to refer to as my "hot" lane proposal, SB 5605, would cost participants \$500 annually, which would be deposited in the state's motor vehicle account.

Surgeries cancelled, clinics shut down, trauma centers closed - a trend that seems destined to hurt families. Across the nation and here in Washington, the cost of malpractice insurance is threatening access to health care and eliminating jobs in the health care industry. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has named Washington one of nine "Red Alert" states experiencing an acute liability crisis. Since 1998, Washington state has experienced a 31-percent increase in the number of physicians moving out of state. In Washington, malpractice premiums for physicians range from a minimum of about

\$1,000 per month, to as high as \$78,567 per year for neurological specialists. This situation has put tort reform on the legislative agenda this year. SB 5209 seeks to protect injured parties and still make damage awards reasonable. The measure caps noneconomic damages at a quarter of a million dollars.

Too much publicly owned land is pushing some rural counties to the verge of bankruptcy. The survival of many of Washington's rural counties with a high percentage of nontaxable, publicly owned land is at stake. Hit by the loss of motor vehicle excise tax revenue, the recession and the limits of I-747, these counties are feeling the pinch of nontaxable land. Skamania County, for example, can tax only 14 percent of its land. Ferry County can tax only 16 percent. Other counties hard hit are Yakima, Okanogan, Jefferson and Chelan. SB 5020 addresses this problem by reducing state government's ability to buy more land. Under this measure, no more than five contiguous acres of land can be purchased by a state agency without legislative approval in counties where nontaxable public and tribal land exceeds 70 percent.

Please use this space for any comments, suggestions or problems you would like me to know about. Or call the toll-free Legislative Hotline at 1-800-562-6000.



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